

Assessing Volunteer Programs: Using the Net Benefits Index at Natural Resource Agencies

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Abstract

Volunteer programs at natural resource agencies are expanding, creating a greater need for measurement and evaluation of program success. We surveyed 81 volunteer resource managers at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to assess the value of the Net Benefits Index as a measure of staff satisfaction with the volunteer program. The Net Benefits Index was positively correlated with two measures of staff satisfaction, indicating that the Index can serve as a useful proxy for satisfaction while also providing detailed information about the specific benefits and challenges faced by volunteer managers. The advantages of the Net Benefits Index are that it is easy to calculate and can be used to provide a snapshot of changes in staff satisfaction over time. One disadvantage of the Net Benefits Index is that it may have to be tailored to individual volunteer programs.

Key Words: natural resources; Net Benefits Index; program evaluation; volunteer management.

Introduction

Natural resource and environmental agencies use volunteers for many tasks, from customer service to citizen science (Leslie & Velez, 2004). Reliance on volunteers is increasing due to stretched budgets, broadening agency goals, and a desire to incorporate stakeholders into management (Pfeffer & Wagenet, 2007). One challenge of implementing a successful volunteer program is finding time and staff to successfully manage a volunteer force. This challenge is both practical, as managing volunteers is time-consuming and may require specialized skill, and attitudinal, as some agency staff may resent volunteers or be concerned that volunteer-collected

data will be unreliable (Foster-Smith & Evans, 2003). Agency managers often cite staff satisfaction with and support of volunteer programs as a significant challenge (Jacobson, 2009; Jacobson, Carlton & Monroe, 2006). Despite the prevalence of volunteer programs in natural resource agencies and the need for critical assessment to improve the programs (Ferraro & Pattanayak, 2006), there have been few published, data-based assessments of volunteer programs in natural resource agencies.

The Net Benefits Index has been proposed as a means of measuring staff satisfaction with charitable organizations' volunteer programs (Hager & Brudney,

2005). The Net Benefits Index is an additive index that determines whether an organization's staff perceives its volunteer program as providing a net benefit to the organization. Though couched in terms of costs and benefits, the Index is not a traditional cost-benefit analysis. Instead, it measures staff perception, an important component of job satisfaction (Mathieu, Hofmann, & Farr, 1993). Measuring the satisfaction of recreationists, volunteers, and staff in natural resource agency volunteer programs is often complex (Jacobson 2009; Jacobson, Carlton, & Monroe, 2012). The Net Benefits Index, which is quick to conduct, minimizes the complexity and can provide a timely snapshot of staff opinion.

This study assesses the Net Benefits Index as a measure of staff satisfaction at a natural resource agency. We surveyed volunteer resource managers (VRMs) in the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), who collectively supervise approximately 1200 active volunteers, and compared Index scores to reported staff satisfaction levels from a survey of FWC staff. This study tests whether the Net Benefits Index effectively reflects employee satisfaction with volunteer programs while providing additional data for program improvement.

Methods

All FWC staff (n=809), including those who reported supervising volunteers, were sent an internet-based questionnaire about the FWC volunteer program. The questionnaire was designed and administered using Dillman's Tailored Design Method (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). Potential respondents were sent a pre-survey notice from the researchers and 3 reminder emails, including one signed by the FWC director.

To calculate the Net Benefits Index, respondents who self-identified as volunteer

resource managers rated 6 benefits and 8 challenges related to using volunteers. The list of benefits and challenges was developed by Hager and Brudney (2005) in consultation with a Delphi panel of volunteer resource managers from charities. Respondents rated the benefits and challenges of the volunteer program on a three-item scale that was adjusted to provide equal weighting of the total benefits and challenges. The benefits were rated as helping to a "Great Extent" (2.66 points), "Moderate Extent" (1.33 points), or "Not at All" (0 points). The challenges were rated as being a "Big Problem" (2 points), "Small Problem" (1 point), or "Not a Problem" (0 points). Calculation of the Index ($\sum \text{benefits} - \sum \text{challenges}$) resulted in scores between -16 (all challenges) and +16 (all benefits) (Hager and Brudney, 2005).

Additionally, respondents were asked two general satisfaction items, rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree):

1. The effort I invest in supervising volunteers is worth it because of the benefits that volunteers provide.
2. Overall, I'm satisfied with the volunteer program in my division or office.

The Pearson product-moment correlation was used to measure the association between the Net Benefits Index and the satisfaction items, using SPSS version 16.0 (SPSS Inc., Englewood Cliffs, NJ).

Results

Eighty-one volunteer resource managers responded to the survey. While the survey method prevented class-specific response rate calculation, the response rate for all FWC staff (including VRMs and other staff members) was 67.8%. Comparing the first and last waves of respondents (Armstrong & Overton, 1977) revealed no evidence of nonresponse bias.

The average Net Benefits Index score was 5.47 (SD=4.662), indicating that the benefits of using volunteers moderately outweighed the challenges. The normalized (i.e., with weighting removed) score for each item in the Net Benefits Index can be found in Table 1. The mean score for the “effort I invest in supervising volunteers is worth it because of the benefits that volunteers provide” item was 4.95 (SD=1.24) on a scale of 1–5, indicating that,

on average, respondents strongly agreed with that statement. The average score for the “Overall, I’m satisfied with the volunteer program in my division or office” item was 3.65 (SD=0.94) on a scale of 1–5, indicating slight agreement. Both general items were significantly positively correlated with the Net Benefits Index ($r=0.525$ and 0.458 , respectively, $p<0.01$) and each other ($r=0.405$, $p<0.01$).

Table 1. Net Benefits Index item scores for the 81 Volunteer Resource Managers, modified from Hager and Brudney (2005). Items were rated on a normalized, 0–2 scale with higher ratings indicating a greater benefit or challenge.

Item	Mean Score (S.D)
<i>Benefits</i>	
Cost savings	1.63 (0.58)
Increased public support for your programs, or improved community relations	1.62 (0.68)
Capability to provide services or levels of services you otherwise could not provide	1.59 (0.69)
Increased quality of programs or services you provide	1.58 (0.64)
Access to specialized skills possessed by volunteers	1.47 (0.77)
More detailed attention to the people you serve	1.39 (0.69)
<i>Challenges</i>	
Indifference or resistance on the part of paid staff toward volunteers	1.06 (0.55)
Volunteers’ absenteeism, unreliability, or poor work habits or work quality	1.00 (0.57)
Recruiting sufficient numbers of volunteers	0.87 (0.66)
Regulatory, legal, liability constraints on volunteer involvement	0.84 (0.73)
Lack of staff time to properly train and supervise volunteers	0.83 (0.65)
Recruiting volunteers with the right skill set or expertise	0.81 (0.62)
Recruiting volunteers available during the workday	0.76 (0.70)
Lack of adequate funds for supporting volunteer involvement	0.71 (0.68)

Discussion

The Net Benefits Index was significantly positively correlated with both of the satisfaction questions. This result indicates that the Index may be an appropriate indicator of volunteer resource manager (VRM) satisfaction with volunteer programs, with higher Index scores

coinciding with higher overall satisfaction. Additionally, the Index provided more detailed information about which parts of the volunteer program were more beneficial or more challenging. For example, VRMs found indifference of paid staff toward volunteers and volunteer absenteeism to be the largest challenges and program funding

to be the smallest challenge. Similarly, VRMs found cost savings and increased public support to be bigger benefits than the ability to pay detailed attention to the people they serve. Collecting empirical data such as this Index is a critical part of assessing program success and making program improvements (Margoluis and Salafsky 1998).

There are several caveats that must be considered. First, the Index is additive and based on an assumption that the weighting scheme, designed to count the benefits and challenges equally, is appropriate. Further research might indicate that certain benefits or challenges are more important than others and should be weighted differently. Additionally, appropriate weightings may vary by organization, and other agency-specific benefits or challenges may need to be incorporated.

However, such concerns overlook the premise of the Net Benefits Index. On the whole, the Index provides an easy-to-administer, quick assessment of staff satisfaction with a volunteer program. The questionnaire delineates both benefits and challenges associated with a volunteer program that might not be captured by general satisfaction-type questions, and may be used to improve programming. Additionally, the Index can be measured over time to assess general trends in the program or even compared across different segments of a large volunteer program. In many cases, the simplicity and user-friendliness of the Index might outweigh the questions surrounding its constraints, providing a net benefit, indeed.

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